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DE RUEHSK #0397/01 1021521
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FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4212
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS IMMEDIATE
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE IMMEDIATE
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE IMMEDIATE 1083

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MINSK 000397

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/12/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO INAUGURATED: A PALE IMAGE

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: Belarusian dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko was inaugurated in a brief, highly orchestrated and sparsely attended ceremony in Minsk April 8. In an unusually short speech, a depressed looking Lukashenko stressed his re-election represented the people,s will and lashed out at outside forces for attempting to export the &virus of revolutions8 into &this island of stability.8 No heads of state attended the ceremony, which was held under extraordinarily tight security with only a few hundred bored onlookers bussed in to witness the sober event. After receiving the oath of the Belarusian military in an outdoor parade on Minsk,s October Square, site of anti-Lukashenko demonstration only two weeks earlier, Lukashenko, dressed in his &Commander-in-Chief8 uniform, got into to his motorcade and sped off, disappearing once again from public view. End Summary.

Inauguration Begins

12. (U) On Saturday April 8 Aleksandr Lukashenko was sworn in as president for his third term. Live television showed Lukashenko,s motorcade driving from his Drozdhy residence along the Boulevard of the Victors devoid of crowds but lined by hundreds of leather coated security agents facing the buildings along the route as if to guard against any attack or demonstration. The city center had been closed to all vehicular and pedestrian traffic several hours prior to the start of the 3 PM ceremony. The motorcade stopped at October Square in front of the Palace of the Republic. Lukashenko,s Mercedes limousine rolled up to the very spot on the square where two weeks before demonstrators had brazenly set up their tents. Dressed in a dark suit but looking like he was wearing a bullet-proof vest underneath, Lukashenko alighted from the vehicle. Accompanied only by the sound of trumpets, he walked along a 200-meter long red carpet lined by soldiers leading across the square past a crowd of spectators sitting in special stands to the Palace itself and into Palace of the Republic where 3,000 invited guests including the entire Belarusian government stood to greet him with applause.

13. (U) A serious looking Lukashenko stepped up onto the stage decorated with Belarusian flags, the Presidential standard and a white podium and large white desk placed in the middle of the stage. Standing nervously in a row off to the side were the heads of the two chambers of Parliament, the head of the Constitutional Court and the Orthodox Metropolitan Filaret. Central Election Committee chairwoman Lidiya Yermoshina was also on stage and acted as MC. In a quavering voice, Yermoshina opened the ceremony and asked Lukashenko to take his oath of office. Lukashenko went up to the lectern and placed his right hand on a leather-bound copy of Belarus, constitution. As required by the Constitution, he

recited the oath in poorly accented Belarusian, one of the very rare instances when Lukashenko has spoken the language. Yermoshina then walked up to Lukashenko and handed him his &presidential identity card,8 getting a kiss on the cheek for her effort. She then directed him to the desk in the center of the stage for him to sign his attestation document.

As Lukashenko got up to stand by the lectern again, Head of the Upper House of Parliament Gennady Navitsky, the Chairman of the Constitutional Court Georgi Vasilevich, and Metropolitan Filaret gave short remarks praising Lukashenko and wishing him &good health and fortune.8 Filaret recited a verse from the Psalms referring to responsibility coming from the Almighty.

An Unusually Short Speech

14. (C) Following these accolades, Lukashenko addressed the assembled who sat beneath a large Russian language banner that read &For a strong and prosperous Belarus8) Lukashenko,s campaign theme. In an unusually (for Lukashenko) short speech, and in an equally unusual unemotional voice, Lukashenko stressed his re-election reflected the clear will of the people &despite the malicious and crude foreign and domestic pressure.8 &Belarusians once again proved that they would not be manipulated.8 The President thanked Belarusian voters who believe in his &strategic8 plan for Belarus and thanked Russia, the CIS, and China for their support. Lukashenko said he was responsible for the fate of the country.

On The Horrible Revolution Virus

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15. (C) Lukashenko vowed to lead with the citizens, interest in mind and pronounced the new slogan for his presidency is &government for the people.8 Lukashenko noted Belarus had accomplished a lot in the last 10 years without revolution and without theft of the nation,s wealth. He cited revolutions in other CIS countries as evidence that calm and order were important for a country,s development. Lukashenko accused other nations of trying to humiliate Belarus, the &island of stability,8 and make it the next victim in the series of color revolutions. He claimed these countries, especially Belarus, new EU members, under the guise of &so-called8 democratic intentions, unsuccessfully tried to export to Belarus &foreign technologies of destruction,8 &total chaos,8 &humiliation,8 and &spiritual degradation.8 Lukashenko claimed these efforts were not the will of the peoples of these neighboring countries who know and respect Belarus. Rather these were the efforts of the leaderships of these countries to draw attention away from their own failures to provide for their peoples. He called on these &politicians8 to concentrate on resolving the problems &in their own houses8 and warned that Belarus enjoyed a strong immunity from &revolutionary virus.8

A Government For the People

16. (C) The President told the audience that the new five-year plan, accepted at the March 2-3 All Belarusian People,s National Assembly, encapsulated his goals for his third term. The plan would result in a better economy and a higher quality life. Lukashenko dubbed the plan &A Government For The People8 and claimed it would efficiently reduce red tape and bureaucracy and be based on the principle that the government should solve people,s problems. According to Lukashenko, the plan would significantly increase wages, pensions, student stipends, and welfare, improve medical services, and make village life more comfortable.

¶7. (C) Lukashenko said Belarus opposed aggression in any form and wanted friends, not enemies, in the international arena. Belarus was &holding its hand out8 to all countries for &equal and mutual8 cooperation.

On the Opposition

¶8. (C) Lukashenko repeated that the majority of Belarusians made their choice and no country could ignore their decision. He noted the opposition,s revolutionary activities failed because the Belarusian people did not respect their efforts to degrade Belarus in the eyes of the outside world.

The Heart of Europe and A New History

¶9. (C) Lukashenko predicted Belarus, the &geographic heart8 of Europe, would soon have a highly developed economy and culture that would be attractive to business. He said his reelection and five-year plan was a new page in Belarus, heroic history and maintained that Belarus would become a strong and developed nation.

I Will Not Disgrace You

¶10. (C) Lukashenko pledged to be a servant of the people and promised to be an honest, fair, and sincere leader who would not betray the people,s trust. Lukashenko, assurance &I will never disgrace you8 drew the only applause from the crowd during his ten minute speech. He added he would never ignore the nation,s interest to appease foreign powers &from across the Atlantic,8 as other political leaders had done. He noted he did not know if he should be happy with the honor he had been bestowed as it has been a heavy burden, but he concluded that he would carry the cross in the service of the people.

The Military Parade

¶11. (C) Lukashenko left the stage to a standing ovation as he strode alone down the aisle and out of the auditorium. State TV carrying the event live then cut to a twenty minute tape extolling the progress Belarus has made over the last twelve years. The live broadcast resumed to show Lukashenko, now dressed in his full &Commander-in-Chief8 military uniform (also it seemed with a bullet-proof vest beneath) stride out of the Palace of the Republic to the sound of trumpets into October Square where he walked up to a reviewing platform

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facing uniformed contingents of the Belarusian Army, Border guards, KGB, Internal Ministry and Emergency Situation troops. Uniformed heads of the respective Ministries and Committees including Minister of the Interior Vladimir Naumov, Defense Minister Leonid Maltsev, and BKGB Chief Stepan Sukharenko stood in a line not far from Lukashenko as did the civilian ministers led by Prime Minister Sergey Sidorsky. Lukashenko launched into a short speech in which he repeated the themes of his earlier inaugural address, although he emphasized that Belarus would be prepared to repel any attack from outside forces seeking to pressure or subdue the Belarusian people. After he ended his remarks with a rather weak &Hurrah,8 the assembled troops under command of MOD Maltsev yelled out their oath of allegiance to the president and after three rousing &hurrahs8 goose stepped past their saluting &Commander-in-Chief.8 With the sound of boots crashing down on the pavement and dressed in his military uniform with large Soviet style saucer hat, the mustachioed Lukashenko looked very much like the Fuhrer of another time who also took a salute of his troops not far from the site of the day,s parade. Following the parade, Lukashenko shook hands with his government that had, per the Constitution, just tendered its resignations and then walked

to his waiting motorcade that sped away once again through empty streets, presumably back to his Drozhdy retreat. Unlike earlier times, he did not reappear later to participate in the large concert held on October Square in his honor.

A Pale Image

¶12. (C) Lukashenko did not look like his old self at this event. He walked awkwardly and when standing on the stage looked like a stiff wind could easily blow him over. The caked-on makeup could not cover the large bags underneath his sunken eyes and the cameras showed his right hand clenched into a fist and his left hand slightly twitching (newspaper photos the day after airbrushed out all these defects.) His eyes frequently wandered about the room. He seemed to breathe irregularly and each breath caused his whole body to move. There were little intonations in his speech and he did not display any of his usual charisma.

Bored Crowd

¶13. (C) The audience at the ceremony both inside the Palace of the Republic and outside on October Square was largely comprised of GOB officials and selected people who were required to be there. Groups of pensioners and students were bussed in and given flags to wave. Few seemed overjoyed to spend a rare sunny Saturday afternoon as part of this spectacle. The EU and U.S. ambassadors (mercifully) did not receive invitations and the heads of missions of Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Japan and Israel, who did, regretted. Only CIS, China and Muslim country ambassadors (Iran, Palestine, Libya) attended. No foreign heads of state were invited. Russian luminaries of the &union state8 sat prominently in the front row. During Lukashenko,s speeches, the audiences showed little emotion and gave unenthusiastic applause. A local Embassy employee told Poloffs many people he knew were forced to attend the inauguration, including his child,s school principal.

Comment

¶14. (C) Lukashenko,s inauguration reflected very much the state of tension and uncertainty surrounding Europe,s last dictator these days. The empty streets, heavy security presence and Lukashenko,s relatively brief, orchestrated appearance did not impart a festive, celebratory atmosphere or the image of a healthy, exultant victor. Where were the 83 percent of the voters who cast their ballots for Lukashenko? Certainly not celebrating their hero in the streets of Minsk. Even state media gave rather short shrift to the event and did not dwell on Lukashenko himself. In fact the cameras showed more the audience than the leader. Lukashenko looked alone, isolated, shaken, lacking energy, defensive and uncertain, adding to the sense his dominance is waning. Even the picked audience looked nervous and uncertain wondering perhaps how long the man before them would last. One camera shot of the crowd observing the military parade seemed to say it all: it showed two young girls utterly bored leaning on each other half asleep while an old pensioner mechanically waved her red and green &Lukashenko8 flag. One wonders if the state media was deliberately making a statement of its own. The Lukashenko of April 8 seemed a pale image of himself. People are watching and waiting, and for those in the regime, worrying.

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